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that the one possesses any practical knowledge of facts, or any practical experience in life which the other does not? Clearly not. The difference between them lies much deeper, and is to be looked for in their general views of the principles of social organization and the objects and effects of industrial activity. What makes the proposed instruction more necessary is that each one conceives the general principles from which he reasons so obvious that he seldom or never takes the trouble to examine them critically. Not only the will, but even the power to make such an examination seems reserved to the educated few. Yet, if it is from such principles that the great differences of opinion flow, all discussion which is not directed to the examination of these must fail of its object. It is therefore only to the more thorough education of the masses in such general laws of wealth as those which we have pointed out that we can look for great improvements in our social policy.

SIMON NEWCOMB.

ART. VII. — 1. *Publications of the Chaucer Society.* London. 1869-70.

2. *Étude sur G. Chaucer considéré comme imitateur des Trouvères.* Par E. G. SANDRAS, Agrégé de l'Université. Paris: Auguste Dusand. 1859. 8vo. pp. 298.

3. *Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury-Geschichten, uebersetzt in den Versmassen der Urschrift, und durch Einleitung und Anmerkungen erläutert.* Von WILHELM HERTZBERG. Hildburg-hausen. 1866. 12mo. pp. 674.

4. *Chaucer in Seinen Beziehungen zur italienischen Literatur. Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung der Doctorwürde.* Von ALFONS KISSNER. Bonn. 1867. 8vo. pp. 81.

WILL it *do* to say anything more about Chaucer? Can any one hope to say anything, not new, but even fresh, on a topic so well worn? It may well be doubted; and yet one is always the better for a walk in the morning air, — a medicine which may be taken over and over again without any sense of sameness, or any failure of its invigorating quality. There is

a pervading wholesomeness in the writings of this man,— a vernal property that soothes and refreshes in a way of which no other has ever found the secret. I repeat to myself a thousand times, —

“Whan that Aprilë with his showrës sotë
The droughte of March hath percëd to the rotë,
And bathëd every veine in swich licour
Of which vertue engendered is the flour, —
When Zephyrus eek with his swetë breth
Enspirëd hath in every holt and heth
The tender croppës, and the yongë sonne
Hath in the ram his halfë cors yronne,
And smalë foulës maken melodië,” —

and still at the thousandth time a breath of uncontaminate springtide seems to lift the hair upon my forehead. If here be not the *largior ether*, the serene and motionless atmosphere of classical antiquity, we find at least the *seclusum nemus*, the *domos placidas*, and the *oubliance*, as Froissart so sweetly calls it, that persuade us we are in an Elysium none the less sweet that it appeals to our more purely human, one might almost say domestic, sympathies. We may say of Chaucer's muse, as Overbury of his milkmaid, “her breath is her own, which scents all the year long of *June* like a new-made haycock.” The most hardened *roué* of literature can scarce confront these simple and winning graces without feeling somewhat of the unworn sentiment of his youth revive in him. Modern imaginative literature has become so self-conscious, and therefore so melancholy, that Art, which should be “the world's sweet inn,” whither we repair for refreshment and repose, has become rather a watering-place, where one's own private touch of the liver-complaint is exasperated by the affluence of other sufferers whose talk is a narrative of morbid symptoms. Poets have forgotten that the first lesson of literature, no less than of life, is the learning how to burn your own smoke; that the way to be original is to be healthy; that the fresh color, so delightful in all good writing, is won by escaping from the fixed air of self into the brisk atmosphere of universal sentiments; and that to make the common marvellous, as if it were a revelation, is the test of genius. It is good to retreat now and then beyond earshot of the introspective confidences of modern

literature, and to lose ourselves in the gracious worldliness of Chaucer. Here was a healthy and hearty man, so genuine that he need not ask whether he were genuine or no, so sincere as quite to forget his own sincerity, so truly pious that he could be happy in the best world that God chose to make, so humane that he loved even the foibles of his kind. Here was a truly epic poet, without knowing it, who did not waste time in considering whether his age were good or bad, but quietly taking it for granted as the best that ever was or could be for *him*, has left us such a picture of contemporary life as no man ever painted. The pupil of manifold experience, — scholar, courtier, soldier, ambassador, who had known poverty as a housemate and been the companion of princes, — his was one of those happy temperaments that could equally enjoy both halves of culture, — the world of books and the world of men.

“Unto this day it doth mine hertē boote,
That I have had my world as in my time!”

The portrait of Chaucer, which we owe to the loving regret of his disciple Occleve, confirms the judgment of him which we make from his works. It is, I think, more engaging than that of any other poet. The downcast eyes, half sly, half meditative, the sensuous mouth, the broad brow, drooping with weight of thought, and yet with an inexpugnable youth shining out of it as from the morning forehead of a boy, are all noticeable, and not less so their harmony of placid tenderness. We are struck, too, with the smoothness of the face as of one who thought easily, whose phrase flowed naturally, and who had never puckered his brow over an unmanageable verse.

Nothing has been added to our knowledge of Chaucer's life since Sir Harris Nicholas, with the help of original records, weeded away the fictions by which the few facts were choked and overshadowed. We might be sorry that no confirmation has been found for the story, fathered on a certain phantasmal Mr. Buckley, that Chaucer was “fined two shillings for beating a Franciscan friar in Fleet Street,” if it were only for the alliteration; but we refuse to give up the meeting with Petrarch. All the probabilities are in its favor. That Chaucer, being at Milan, should not have found occasion to ride across so far as Padua, for the sake of seeing the most famous literary man of

the day, is incredible. If Froissart could journey on horse-back through Scotland and Wales, surely Chaucer, whose curiosity was as lively as his, might have ventured what would have been a mere pleasure-trip in comparison. I cannot easily bring myself to believe that he is not giving some touches of his own character in that of the Clerk of Oxford : —

“ For him was liefer have at his bed’s head
 A twenty bookes clothed in black and red
 Of Aristotle and his philosophië
 Than robes rich, or fiddle or psaltrië :
 But although that he were a philosòpher
 Yet had he but a little gold in coffer :
 Of study took he mostë care and heed ;
 Not one word spake he morë than was need :
 All that he spake it was of high prudencë,
 And short and quick, and full of great sentencë ;
 Sounding in moral virtue was his speech
 And gladly would he learn and gladly teach.”

That, himself as plump as Horace, he should have described the Clerk as being lean, will be no objection to those who remember how carefully Chaucer effaces his own personality in his great poem. Our chief debt to Sir Harris Nicholas is for having disproved the story that Chaucer, imprisoned for complicity in the insurrection of John of Northampton, had set himself free by betraying his accomplices. That a poet, one of whose leading qualities is his good sense and moderation, and who should seem to have practised his own rule, to

“ Fly from the press and dwell with soothfastness ;
 Suffice unto thy good though it be small,”

should have been concerned in any such political excesses, was improbable enough ; but that he should add to this the baseness of broken faith was incredible except to such as in a doubtful story

“ Demen gladly to the badder end.”

Sir Harris Nicholas has proved by the records that the fabric is baseless, and we may now read the poet’s fine verse,

“ Truth is the highest thing a man may keep,”

without a pang. We are thankful that Chaucer’s shoulders are finally discharged of that weary load, “ The Testament of

Love.”* The later biographers seem inclined to make Chaucer a younger man at his death in 1400 than has hitherto been supposed. Herr Hertzberg even puts his birth so late as 1340. But, till more conclusive evidence is produced, we shall adhere to the received dates as on the whole more consonant with the probabilities of the case. The monument is clearly right as to the year of his death, and the chances are at least even that both this and the date of birth were copied from an older inscription. The only counter-argument that has much force is the manifestly unfinished condition of the *Canterbury Tales*. That a man of seventy odd could have put such a spirit of youth into those matchless prologues will not, however, surprise those who remember Dryden’s second spring-time. It is plain that the notion of giving unity to a number of disconnected stories by the device which Chaucer adopted was an afterthought. These stories had been written, and some of them even published, at periods far asunder, and without any reference to connection among themselves. The prologues, and those parts which internal evidence justifies us in taking them to have been written after the thread of plan to string them on was conceived, are in every way more mature,—in knowledge of the world, in easy mastery of verse and language, and in the overpoise of sentiment by judgment. They may with as much probability be referred to a green old age as to the middle-life of a man who, upon any theory of the dates, was certainly slow in ripening.

The formation of a Chaucer Society, now four centuries and a half after the poet’s death, gives suitable occasion for taking a new observation of him, as of a fixed star, not only in our own, but in the European literary heavens, “whose worth’s unknown although his height be taken.” The admirable work now doing by this Society, whose establishment was mainly due to the pious zeal of Mr. Furnivall, deserves recognition

* Professor Child, the highest authority on such a question, doubts also the authenticity of the “*Romaunt of the Rose*,” the “*Court of Love*,” and the “*Assembly of Foules*.” Mr. Bradshaw’s judgment had arrived independently at the same result. To these doubtful productions there is strong ground, both moral and æsthetic, for adding the *Parson’s Tale*.

from all who know how to value the too rare union of accurate scholarship with minute exactness in reproducing the text. The six-text edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, giving what is practically equivalent to six manuscript copies, is particularly deserving of gratitude from this side the water, as it for the first time affords to Americans the opportunity of independent critical study and comparison. This beautiful work is fittingly inscribed to our countryman, Professor Child, of Harvard, a lover of Chaucer, "so proved by his wordes and his werke," who has done more for the great poet's memory than any man since Tyrwhitt. We earnestly hope that the Society may find enough support to print all the remaining manuscript texts of importance, for there can hardly be any one of them that may not help us to a valuable hint. The works of M. Sandras and Herr Hertzberg show that this is a matter of interest not merely or even primarily to English scholars. The introduction to the latter is one of the best essays on Chaucer yet written, while the former, which is an investigation of the French and Italian sources of the poet, supplies us with much that is new and worth having as respects the training of the poet, and the obstacles of fashion and taste through which he had to force his way before he could find free play for his native genius or even so much as arrive at a consciousness thereof. M. Sandras is in every way a worthy pupil of the accomplished M. Victor Leclerc, and, though he lays perhaps a little too much stress on the indebtedness of Chaucer in particulars, shows a singularly intelligent and clear-sighted eye for the general grounds of his claim to greatness and originality. It is these grounds which I propose chiefly to examine here.

The first question we put to any poet, nay, to any so-called national literature, is that which *Farinata* addressed to Dante, *Chi fur li maggior tui?* Here is no question of plagiarism, for poems are not made of words and thoughts and images, but of that something in the poet himself which can compel them to obey him and move to the rhythm of his nature. Thus it is that the new poet, however late he come, can never be forestalled, and the shipbuilder who built the pinnacle of Columbus has as much claim to the discovery of America as he who sug-

gests a thought by which some other man opens new worlds to us has to a share in that achievement by him unconceived and inconceivable. Chaucer undoubtedly began as an imitator, perhaps as mere translator, serving the needful apprenticeship in the use of his tools. Children learn to speak by watching the lips and catching the words of those who know how already, and poets learn in the same way from their elders. They import their raw material from any and everywhere, and the question at last comes down to this, — whether an author have original force enough to assimilate all he has acquired, or that be so overmastering as to assimilate *him*. If the poet turn out the stronger, we allow him to help himself from other people with wonderful equanimity. Should a man discover the art of transmuting metals and present us with a lump of gold as large as an ostrich-egg, would it be in human nature to inquire too nicely whether he had stolen the lead?

Nothing is more certain than that great poets are not sudden prodigies, but slow results. As an oak profits by the foregone lives of immemorial vegetable races that have worked-over the juices of earth and air into organic life out of whose dissolution a soil might gather fit to maintain that nobler birth of nature, so we may be sure that the genius of every remembered poet drew the forces that built it up out of the decay of a long succession of forgotten ones. Nay, in proportion as the genius is vigorous and original will its indebtedness be greater, will its roots strike deeper into the past and grope in remoter fields for the virtue that must sustain it. Indeed, if the works of the great poets teach anything, it is to hold mere invention somewhat cheap. It is not the finding of a thing, but the making something out of it after it is found, that is of consequence. Accordingly, Chaucer, like Shakespeare, invented almost nothing. Wherever he found anything directed to Geoffrey Chaucer, he took it and made the most of it. It was not the subject treated, but himself, that was the new thing. *Cela m'appartient de droit*, Molière is reported to have said when accused of plagiarism. Chaucer pays that “usurious interest which genius,” as Coleridge says, “always pays in borrowing.” The characteristic touch is his own. In the famous passage about the caged bird, copied from the “Romance of the Rose,” the

“gan eten wormes” was added by him. We must let him, if he will, eat the heart out of the literature that had preceded him, as we sacrifice the mulberry-leaves to the silkworm, because he knows how to convert them into something richer and more lasting. The question of originality is not one of form, but of substance, not of cleverness, but of imaginative power. Given your material, in other words the life in which you live, how much can you see in it? For on that depends how much you can make of it. Is it merely an arrangement of man’s contrivance, a patchwork of expedencies for temporary comfort and convenience, good enough if it last your time, or is it so much of the surface of that ever-flowing deity which we call Time, wherein we catch such fleeting reflection as is possible for us of our relation to perdurable things? This is what makes the difference between *Æschylus* and *Euripides*, between *Shakespeare* and *Fletcher*, between *Goethe* and *Heine*, between literature and rhetoric. Something of this depth of insight, if not in the fullest, yet in no inconsiderable measure, characterizes *Chaucer*. We must not let his playfulness, his delight in the world as mere spectacle, mislead us into thinking that he was incapable of serious purpose or insensible to the deeper meanings of life.

There are four principal sources from which *Chaucer* may be presumed to have drawn for poetical suggestion or literary culture, — the *Latins*, the *Troubadours*, the *Trouvères*, and the *Italians*. It is only the two latter who can fairly claim any immediate influence in the direction of his thought or the formation of his style. The only *Latin* poet who can be supposed to have influenced the spirit of mediæval literature is *Ovid*. In his sentimentality, his love of the marvellous and the picturesque, he is its natural precursor. The analogy between his *Fasti* and the versified legends of saints is more than a fanciful one. He was certainly popular with the poets of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. *Virgil* had wellnigh become mythical. The chief merit of the *Provençal* poets is in having been the first to demonstrate that it was possible to write with elegance in a modern dialect, and their interest for us is mainly as forerunners, as indications of tendency. Their literature is prophecy, not fulfilment. Its formal sentiment culminated in *Laura*, its ideal aspiration in *Beatrice*. *Shakespeare’s* hundred

nature, till Beatrice becomes a half-human, half-divine abstraction, a woman still to memory and devotion, a disembodied symbol to the ecstasy of thought. The Provençal love-poetry was as abstracted from all sensuality as that of Petrarca, but it stops short of that larger and more gracious style of treatment which has secured him a place in all gentle hearts and refined imaginations forever. In it also woman leads her servants upward, but it is along the easy slopes of conventional sentiment, and no Troubadour so much as dreamed of that loftier region, native to Dante, where *the* woman is subtilized into *das Ewig-Weibliche*, type of man's finer conscience and nobler aspiration made sensible to him only through her.

On the whole, it would be hard to find anything more tediously artificial than the Provençal literature, except the reproduction of it by the Minnesingers. The *Tedeschi lurchi* certainly *did* contrive to make something heavy as dough out of what was at least light, if not very satisfying, in the canorous dialect of Southern Gaul. But its doom was inevitably predicted in its nature and position, nay, in its very name. It was, and it continues to be, a strictly *provincial* literature, imprisoned within extremely narrow intellectual and even geographical limits. It is not race or language that can inflict this leprous isolation, but some defect of sympathy with the simpler and more universal relations of human nature. You cannot shut up Burns in a dialect bristling with archaisms, nor prevent Béranger from setting all pulses a-dance in the least rhythmic and imaginative of modern tongues. The healthy temperament of Chaucer, with its breadth of interest in all ranks and phases of social life, could have found little that was sympathetic in the evaporated sentiment and rhetorical punctilios of a school of poets which, with rare exceptions, began and ended in courtly dilettantism.

The refined formality with which the literary product of Provence is for the most part stamped, as with a trademark, was doubtless the legacy of Gallo-Roman culture, itself at best derivative and superficial. I think, indeed, that it may well be doubted whether Roman literature, always a half-hardy exotic, could ripen the seeds of living reproduction. The Roman genius was eminently practical, and far more apt for

the triumphs of politics and jurisprudence than of art. Supreme elegance it could and did arrive at in Virgil, but, if I may trust my own judgment, it produced but one original poet, and that was Horace, who has ever since continued the favorite of men of the world, an apostle to the Gentiles of the mild cynicism of middle-age and an after-dinner philosophy. Though in no sense national, he was, more truly than any has ever been since, till the same combination of circumstances produced Béranger, an urbane or city poet. Rome, with her motley life, her formal religion, her easy morals, her spectacles, her luxury, her suburban country-life, was his muse. The situation was new, and found a singer who had wit enough to turn it to account. There are a half-dozen pieces of Catullus unsurpassed (unless their Greek originals should turn up) for lyric grace and fanciful tenderness. The sparrow of Lesbia still pecks the rosy lips of his mistress, immortal as the eagle of Pindar. One profound imagination, one man, who with a more prosperous subject might have been a great poet, lifted Roman literature above its ordinary level of tasteful commonsense. The invocation of Venus, as the genetic force of nature, by Lucretius, seems to me the one sunburst of purely poetic inspiration which the Latin language can show. But this very force, without which *neque fit latum neque amabile quicquam* was wholly wanting in those poets of the post-classic period, through whom the literary influences of the past were transmitted to the romanized provincials. The works of Ausonius interest us as those of our own Dwights and Barlows do. The "Conquest of Canaan" and the "Columbiad" were Connecticut epics no doubt, but were still better than nothing in their day. If not literature, they were at least memories of literature, and such memories are not without effect in reproducing what they regret. The provincial writers of Latin devoted themselves with a dreary assiduity to the imitation of models which they deemed classical, but which were truly so only in the sense that they were the more decorously respectful of the dead form in proportion as the living spirit had more utterly gone out of it. It is, I suspect, to the traditions of this purely rhetorical influence, indirectly exercised, that we are to attribute the rapid passage of the new Provençal poetry from what must have been its origi-

nal popular character to that highly artificial condition which precedes total extinction. It was the alienation of the written from the spoken language (always, perhaps, more or less malignly operative in giving Roman literature a cold-blooded turn as compared with Greek), which, ending at length in total divorce, rendered Latin incapable of supplying the wants of new men and new ideas. The same thing, I am strongly inclined to think, was true of the language of the Troubadours. It had become literary, and so far dead. It is true that no language is ever so far gone in consumption as to be beyond the great-poet-cure. Undoubtedly a man of genius can out of his own superabundant vitality compel life into the most decrepit vocabulary. But it is by the infusion of his own blood, as it were, and not without a certain sacrifice of power. No such rescue came for the *langue d'oc*, which, it should seem, had performed its special function in the development of modern literature, and would have perished even without the Albigensian war. The position of the Gallo-Romans of the South, both ethical and geographical, precluded them from producing anything really great or even original in literature, for that must have its root in a national life, and this they never had. After the Burgundian invasion their situation was in many respects analogous to our own after the Revolutionary War. They had been thoroughly romanized in language and culture, but the line of their historic continuity had been broken. The Roman road, which linked them with the only past they knew, had been buried under the great barbarian land-slide. In like manner we, inheriting the language, the social usages, the literary and political traditions of Englishmen, were suddenly cut adrift from our historical anchorage. Very soon there arose a demand for a native literature, nay, it was even proposed that, as a first step toward it, we should adopt a lingo of our own to be called the Columbian or Hesperian. This, to be sure, was never accomplished, though our English cousins seem to hint sometimes that we have made very fair advances toward it; but if it could have been, our position would have been precisely that of the Provençals when they began to have a literature of their own. They had formed a language which, while it completed their orphanage from their imperial mother, continually recalled her, and

kept alive their pride of lineage. Such reminiscences as they still retained of Latin culture were pedantic and rhetorical,* and it was only natural that out of these they should have elaborated a code of poetical jurisprudence with titles and subtitles applicable to every form of verse and tyrannous over every mode of sentiment. The result could not fail to be artificial and wearisome, except where some man with a truly lyrical genius could breathe life into the rigid formula and make it pliant to his more passionate feeling. The great service of the Provençals was that they kept in mind the fact that poetry was not merely an amusement, but an art, and long after their literary activity had ceased their influence reacted beneficially upon Europe through their Italian pupils. They are interesting as showing the tendency of the Romanic races to a scientific treatment of what, if it be not spontaneous, becomes a fashion and ere long an impertinence. Fauriel has endeavored to prove that they were the first to treat the mediæval heroic legends epically, but the evidence is strongly against him. The testimony of Dante on this point is explicit,† and moreover not a single romance of chivalry has come down to us in a dialect of the pure Provençal.

The Trouvères, on the other hand, are apt to have something *naïve* and vigorous about them, something that smacks of race and soil. Their very coarseness is almost better than the Troubadour delicacy, because it was not an affectation. The difference between the two schools is that between a culture pedantically transmitted and one which grows and gathers strength from natural causes. Indeed, it is to the North of France and to the Trouvères that we are to look for the true origins of our modern literature. I do not mean in their epical poetry, though there is something refreshing in the mere fact of their choos-

* Fauriel, *Histoire de la Gaule Méridionale*, Vol. I. *passim*.

† Allegat ergo pro se lingua *Oïl* quod propter sui faciliorem et delectabiliorem vulgaritatem, quicquid redactum sive inventum est ad vulgare prosaicum, suum est; videlicet biblia cum Trojanorum, Romanorumque gestibus compilata et Arturi regis ambages pulcherrimæ et quamplures aliæ historiæ ac doctrinæ. That Dante by *prosaicum* did not mean prose, but a more inartificial verse, *numeros lege solutos*, is clear. Cf. Wolf, *Ueber die Lais*, pp. 92 *seq.* and notes. It has not, I think, been remarked that Dante borrows his *faciliorem et delectabiliorem* from the *plus dilettable et comune* of his master Brunetto Latini.

ing native heroes and legends as the subjects of their song. It was in their *Fabliaux* and *Lais* that, dealing with the realities of the life about them, they became original and delightful in spite of themselves. Their *Chansons de Geste* are fine specimens of fighting Christianity, highly inspiring for men like Peire de Bergerac, who sings

“ Bel m'es can aug lo resso
 Que fai l'ausbercs ab l'arso,
 Li bruit e il crit e il masan
 Que il corn e las trombas fan ” ; *

but who after reading them — even the best of them, the Song of Roland — can remember much more than a cloud of battle-dust, through which the paladins loom dimly gigantic, and a strong verse flashes here and there like an angry sword? What are the *Roman d'avantures*, the cycle of Arthur and his knights, but a procession of armor and plumes, mere spectacle, not vision like their Grecian antitype, the *Odyssey*, whose pictures of life, whether domestic or heroic, are among the abiding consolations of the mind? An element of disproportion, of grotesqueness,† earmark of the barbarian, disturbs us, even when it does not disgust, in them all. Except the *Roland*, they all want adequate motive, and even in that we may well suspect a reminiscence of the *Iliad*. They are not without a kind of dignity, for manliness is always noble, and there are detached scenes that are striking, perhaps all the more so from their rarity, like the combat of Oliver and Fierabras, and the leave-taking of Parise la Duchesse. But in point of art they are far below even Firdusi, whose great poem is of precisely the same romantic type. The episode of Sohrab and Rustem as much surpasses the former of the passages just alluded to in largeness and energy of treatment, in the true epical quality, as the lament of Tehmine over her son does the latter of them in refined and natural pathos. In our revolt against pseudo-classicism we must not let our admiration for the vigor and freshness which are the merit of this old poetry

* “ My ears no sweeter music know
 Than hauberk's clank with saddlebow,
 The noise, the cries, the tumult blown
 From trumpet and from clarion.”

† Compare Floripar in *Fierabras* with Nausikää, for example.

tempt us to forget that our direct literary inheritance comes to us from an ancestry who would never have got beyond the Age of Iron but for the models of graceful form and delicate workmanship which they found in the tombs of an earlier race.

The great advantages which the *langue d'oïl* had over its sister dialect of the South of France were its wider distribution, and its representing the national and unitary tendencies of the people as opposed to those of provincial isolation. But the Trouvères had also this superiority, that they gave a voice to real and not merely conventional emotions. In comparison with the Troubadours their sympathies were more human, and their expression more popular. While the tiresome ingenuity of the latter busied itself chiefly in the filigree of wiredrawn sentiment and supersubtilized conceit, the former took their subjects from the street and the market as well as from the château. In the one case language had become a mere material for clever elaboration; in the other, as always in live literature, it was a soil from which the roots of thought and feeling unconsciously drew the coloring of vivid expression. The writers of French, by the greater pliancy of their dialect and the simpler forms of their verse, had acquired an ease which was impossible in the more stately and sharply angled vocabulary of the South. Their octosyllabics have not seldom a careless facility not unworthy of Swift in his best mood. They had attained the highest skill and grace in narrative, as the lays of Marie de France and the *Lai de l'Oiselet* bear witness.* Above all, they had learned how to brighten the hitherto monotonous web of story with the gayer hues of fancy.

It is no improbable surmise that the sudden and surprising development of the more strictly epical poetry in the North of France, and especially its growing partiality for historical in preference to mythical subjects, were due to the Normans. The poetry of the Danes was much of it authentic history, or what was believed to be so; the heroes of their Sagas were real men, with wives and children, with relations public and domestic, on the common levels of life, and not mere creatures of imagination, who dwell apart like stars from the vulgar cares and interests of men. If we compare Havelok with the

* If internal evidence may be trusted, the *Lai de l'Espine* is not hers.

least idealized figures of Carlovingian or Arthurian romance we shall have a keen sense of this difference. Manhood has taken the place of caste, and homeliness of exaggeration. Havelok says, —

“ Godwot, I will with thee gang
For to learn some good to get;
Swinken would I for my meat;
It is no shame for to swinken.”

This Dane, we see, is of our own make and stature, a being much nearer our kindly sympathies than his compatriot Ogier, of whom we are told,

“ Dix piès de lonc avoit le chevalier.”

But however large or small share we may allow to the Danes in changing the character of French poetry and supplanting the Romance with the Fabliau, there can be little doubt either of the kind or amount of influence which the Normans must have brought with them into England. I am not going to attempt a definition of the Anglo-Saxon element in English literature, for generalizations are apt to be as dangerous as they are tempting. But as a painter may draw a cloud so that we recognize its general truth, though the boundaries of real clouds never remain the same for two minutes together, so amid the changes of feature and complexion brought about by commingling of race, there still remains a certain cast of physiognomy which points back to some one ancestor of marked and peculiar character. It is toward this type that there is always a tendency to revert, to borrow Mr. Darwin's phrase, and I think the general belief is not without some adequate grounds which in France traces this predominant type to the Kelt, and in England to the Saxon. In old and stationary communities, where tradition has a chance to take root, and where several generations are present to the mind of each inhabitant, either by personal recollection or transmitted anecdote, everybody's peculiarities, whether of strength or weakness, are explained and, as it were, justified upon some theory of hereditary bias. Such and such qualities he got from a grandfather on the spear or a great-uncle on the spindle side. This gift came in a right line from So-and-so; that failing came in by the dilution of the family blood with that of Such-a-one. In this way a certain

allowance is made for every aberration from some assumed normal type, either in the way of reinforcement or defect, and that universal desire of the human mind to have everything accounted for — which makes the moon responsible for the whimsies of the weathercock — is cheaply gratified. But as mankind in the aggregate is always wiser than any single man, because its experience is derived from a larger range of observation and experience, and because the springs that feed it drain a wider region both of time and space, there is commonly some greater or smaller share of truth in all popular prejudices. The meteorologists are beginning to agree with the old women that the moon *is* an accessory before the fact in our atmospheric fluctuations. Now, although to admit this notion of inherited good or ill to its fullest extent would be to abolish personal character, and with it all responsibility, to abdicate freewill, and to make every effort at self-direction futile, there is no inconsiderable alloy of truth in it, nevertheless. No man can look into the title-deeds of what may be called his personal estate, his faculties, his predilections, his failings, — whatever, in short, sets him apart as a capital I, — without something like a shock of dread to find how much of him is held in mortmain by those who, though long ago mouldered away to dust, are yet fatally alive and active in him for good or ill. What is true of individual men is true also of races, and the prevailing belief in a nation as to the origin of certain of its characteristics has something of the same basis in facts of observation as the village estimate of the traits of particular families. *Interdum vulgus rectum videt.*

We are apt, it is true, to talk rather loosely about our Anglo-Saxon ancestors, and to attribute to them in a vague way all the pith of our institutions and the motive power of our progress. For my own part, I think there is such a thing as being *too* Anglo-Saxon, and the warp and woof of the English national character, though undoubtedly two elements mainly predominate in it, is quite too complex for us to pick out a strand here and there, and affirm that the *body* of the fabric is of this or that. Our present concern with the Saxons is chiefly a literary one; but it leads to a study of general characteristics. What, then, so far as we can make it out, seems to be their leading mental

feature? Plainly, understanding, common sense, — a faculty which never carries its possessor very high in creative literature, though it may make him great as an acting and even thinking man. Take Dr. Johnson as an instance. The Saxon, as it appears to me, has never shown any capacity for art, nay, commonly commits ugly blunders when he is tempted in that direction. He has made the best working institutions and the ugliest monuments among the children of men. He is wanting in taste, which is as much as to say that he has no true sense of proportion. His genius is his *solidity*, — an admirable foundation of national character. He is healthy, in no danger of liver-complaint, with digestive apparatus of amazing force and precision. He is the best farmer and best grazier among men, raises the biggest crops and the fattest cattle, and consumes proportionate quantities of both. He settles and sticks like a diluvial deposit on the warm, low-lying levels, physical and moral. He has a prodigious talent, to use our Yankee phrase, of *staying put*. You cannot move him; he and rich earth have a natural sympathy of cohesion. Not quarrelsome, but with indefatigable durability of fight in him, sound of stomach, and not too refined in nervous texture, he is capable of indefinitely prolonged punishment, with a singularly obtuse sense of propriety in acknowledging himself beaten. Among all races perhaps none has shown so acute a sense of the side on which its bread is buttered, and so great a repugnance for having fine phrases take the place of the butyraceous principle. They invented the words “humbug,” “cant,” “sham,” “gag,” “soft-sodder,” “flapdoddle,” and other disenchanting formulas whereby the devil of falsehood and unreality gets his effectual *apage Satana!*

An imperturbable perception of the *real* relations of things is the Saxon's leading quality, — no sense whatever, or at best small, of the ideal in him. He has no notion that two and two ever make five, which is the problem the poet often has to solve. Understanding, that is, equilibrium of mind, intellectual good digestion, this, with unclogged biliary ducts, makes him mentally and physically what we call a very fixed fact; but you shall not find a poet in a hundred thousand square miles, — in many prosperous centuries of such. But one element of incal-

culable importance we have not mentioned. In this homely nature, the idea of God, and of a simple and direct relation between the All-Father and his children, is deeply rooted. There, above all, will he have honesty and simplicity; less than anything else will he have the sacramental wafer,—that beautiful emblem of our dependence on Him who giveth the daily bread; less than anything will he have this smeared with that Barmecide butter of fair words. This is the lovely and noble side of his character. Indignation at this will make him forget crops and cattle; and this, after so many centuries, will give him at last a poet in the monk of Eisleben, who shall cut deep on the memory of mankind that brief creed of conscience, — “Here am I: God help me: I cannot otherwise.” This, it seems to me, with dogged sense of justice, — both results of that equilibrium of thought which springs from clear-sighted understanding, — makes the beauty of the Saxon nature.

He believes in another world, and conceives of it without metaphysical subtleties as something very much after the pattern of this, but infinitely more desirable. Witness the vision of John Bunyan. Once beat it into him that his eternal *well-being*, as he calls it, depends on certain conditions, that only so will the balance in the ledger of eternity be in his favor, and the man who seemed wholly of *this* world will give all that he has, even his life, with a superb simplicity and scorn of the theatric, for a chance in the next. Hard to move, his very solidity of nature makes him terrible when once fairly set agoing. He is the man of all others slow to admit the thought of revolution; but let him once admit it, he will carry it through and make it *stick*, — a secret hitherto undiscoverable by other races.

But poetry is not made out of the understanding; that is not the sort of block out of which you can carve wing-footed Mercuries. The question of common sense is always, “What is it good for?” — a question which would abolish the rose and be answered triumphantly by the cabbage. The danger of the prosaic type of mind lies in the stolid sense of superiority which blinds it to everything ideal, to the use of anything that does not serve the practical purposes of life. Do we not remember how the all-observing and all-fathoming Shakespeare

has typified this in Bottom the weaver? Surrounded by all the fairy creations of fancy, he sends one to fetch him 'the bag of a humble-bee, and can find no better employment for Mustard-seed than to help Cavalero Cobweb scratch his ass's head between the ears. When Titania, queen of that fair ideal world, offers him a feast of beauty, he says he has a good stomach to a pottle of hay!

The Anglo-Saxons never had any real literature of their own. They produced monkish chronicles in bad Latin, and legends of saints in worse metre. Their earlier poetry is essentially Scandinavian. It was that *gens inclytissima Northmanorum* that imported the divine power of imagination, — that power which, mingled with the solid Saxon understanding, produced at last the miracle of Stratford. It was to this adventurous race, which found America before Columbus, which, for the sake of freedom of thought, could colonize inhospitable Iceland, which, as it were, typifying the very action of the imaginative faculty itself, identified itself always with what it conquered, that we owe whatever aquiline features there are in the national physiognomy of the English race. It was through the Normans that the English mind and fancy, hitherto provincial and uncouth, were first infused with the lightness, grace, and self-confidence of Romance literature. They seem to have opened a window to the southward in that solid and somewhat sombre insular character, and it was a painted window all aglow with the figures of tradition and poetry. The old Gothic volume, grim with legends of devilish temptation and satanic lore, they illuminated with the gay and brilliant inventions of a softer climate and more genial moods. Even the stories of Arthur and his knights, toward which the stern Dante himself relented so far as to call them *gratissimas ambages*, most delightful circumlocutions, though of British original, were first set free from the dungeon of a barbarous dialect by the French poets, and so brought back to England, and made popular there by the Normans.

Chaucer, to whom French must have been almost as truly a mother tongue as English, was familiar with all that had been done by Troubadour or Trouvère. In him we see the first result of the Norman yeast upon the home-baked Saxon loaf.

The flour had been honest, the paste well-kneaded, but the inspiring leaven was wanting till the Norman brought it over. Chaucer works still in the solid material of his race, but with what airy lightness has he not infused it? Without ceasing to be English, he has escaped from being insular. But he was something more than this; he was a scholar, a thinker, and a critic. He had studied the *Divina Commedia* of Dante, he had read Petrarca and Boccaccio, and some of the Latin poets. He calls Dante the great poet of Italy, and Petrarch a learned clerk. It is plain that he knew very well the truer purpose of poetry, and had even arrived at the higher wisdom of comprehending the aptitudes and limitations of his own genius. He saw clearly and felt keenly what were the faults and what the wants of the prevailing literature of his country. In the Monk's Tale he slyly satirizes the long-winded morality of Gower, as his prose antitype, Fielding, was to satirize the prolix sentimentality of Richardson. In the rhyme of Sir Thopas he gives the *coup de grace* to the romances of Chivalry, and in his own choice of a subject he heralds that new world in which the actual and the popular were to supplant the fantastic and heroic.

With the single exception of Piers Ploughman, the English poets, his contemporaries, were little else than bad versifiers of legends classic or mediæval, as happened, without selection and without art. Chaucer is the first who broke away from the dreary traditional style, and gave not merely stories, but lively *pictures* of real life as the ever-renewed substance of poetry. He was a reformer, too, not only in literature, but in morals. But as in the former his exquisite tact saved him from all eccentricity, so in the latter the pervading sweetness of his nature could never be betrayed into harshness and invective. He seems incapable of indignation. He mused good-naturedly over the vices and follies of men, and, never forgetting that he was fashioned of the same clay, is rather apt to pity than condemn. There is no touch of cynicism in all he wrote. Dante's brush seems sometimes to have been smeared with the burning pitch of his own fiery lake. Chaucer's pencil is dipped in the cheerful color-box of the old illuminators, and he has their patient delicacy of touch, with a freedom far beyond their somewhat mechanic brilliancy.

English narrative poetry, as Chaucer found it, though it had not altogether escaped from the primal curse of long-windedness so painfully characteristic of its prototype, the French Romance of Chivalry, had certainly shown a feeling for the picturesque, a sense of color, a directness of phrase, and a simplicity of treatment which give it graces of its own and a turn peculiar to itself. In the easy knack of story-telling, the popular minstrels cannot compare with Marie de France. The lightness of fancy, that leaves a touch of sunshine and is gone, is painfully missed in them all. Their incidents enter dispersedly, as the old stage directions used to say, and they have not learned the art of concentrating their force on the key-point of their hearers' interest. But they sometimes yield to an instinctive hint of leaving-off at the right moment, and in their happy negligence achieve an effect only to be matched by the highest successes of art.

“ That lady heard his mourning all
 Right under her chamber wall,
 In her oriel where she was,
 Closèd well with royal glass;
 Fulfilled it was with imagery
 Every window, by and by;
 On each side had there a gin
 Sperrèd [closed] with many a divers pin;
 Anon that lady fair and free
 Undid a pin of ivory
 And wide the window she open set, —
 The sun shone in at her closet.”

It is true the old rhymer relapses a little into the habitual drone of his class, and shows half a mind to bolt into their common inventory style when he comes to his *gins* and *pins*, but he withstands the temptation manfully, and his sunshine fills our hearts with a gush as sudden as that which illumines the lady's oriel. Coleridge and Keats have each in his way felt the charm of this winsome picture, but have hardly equalled its hearty honesty, its economy of material, the supreme test of artistic skill. I admit that the phrase “*had there a gin*” is suspicious, and suggests a French original, but I remember nothing altogether so good in the romances from the other side of the Channel. One more passage occurs to me almost incomparable in its simple straightforward force and choice of the right word.

"Sir Graysteel to his death thus thraws,
He welters [wallows] and the grass updraws;

A little while then lay he still,
(Friends that saw him liked full ill,)
And bled into his armor bright."

The last line, for suggestive reticence, almost deserves to be put beside the famous

"Quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante"

of the great master of laconic narration. In the same poem* the growing love of the lady, in its maidenliness of unconscious betrayal, is touched with a delicacy and tact as surprising as they are delightful. But such passages, which are the despair of poets who have to work in a language that has faded into diction, are exceptional. They are to be set down rather to good luck than art. Even the stereotyped similes of these fortunate illiterates, like "weary as water in a weir," or "glad as grass is of the rain," are new, like nature, at the thousandth repetition. Perhaps our palled taste overvalues the wild flavor of these wayside treasure-troves. They are wood-strawberries, prized in proportion as we must turn over more leaves ere we find one. This popular literature is of value in helping us toward a juster estimate of Chaucer by showing what the mere language was capable of, and that all it wanted was a poet to put it through its paces. For, though the poems I have quoted be, in their present form, later than he, they are, after all, but modernized versions of older copies, which they doubtless reproduce with substantial fidelity.

It is commonly assumed that Chaucer did for English what Dante is supposed to have done for Italian and Luther for German, that he, in short, in some hitherto inexplicable way, created it. But this is to speak loosely and without book. Languages are never made in any such fashion, still less are they the achievement of any single man, however great his genius, however powerful his individuality. They shape themselves by laws as definite as those which guide and limit the growth of other living organisms. Dante, indeed, has told us that he chose to write in the tongue that might be learned of nurses

* *Sir Eger and Sir Grine* in the Percy Folio. The passage quoted is from Ellis.

and chafferers in the market. His practice shows that he knew perfectly well that poetry has needs which cannot be answered by the vehicle of vulgar commerce between man and man. What he instinctively felt was, that there was the living heart of all speech, without whose help the brain were powerless to send will, motion, meaning, to the limbs and extremities. But it is true that a language, as respects the uses of literature, is liable to a kind of syncope. No matter how complete its vocabulary may be, how thorough an outfit of inflections and case-endings it may have, it is a mere dead body without a soul till some man of genius set its arrested pulses once more athrob, and show what wealth of sweetness, scorn, persuasion, and passion lay there awaiting its liberator. In this sense it is hardly too much to say that Chaucer, like Dante, found his native tongue a dialect and left it a language. But it was not what he did with deliberate purpose of reform, it was his kindly and plastic genius that wrought this magic of renewal and inspiration. It was not the new words he introduced,* but his way of using the old ones, that surprised them into grace, ease, and dignity in their own despite. In order to feel fully how much he achieved, let any one subject himself to a penitential course of reading in his contemporary, Gower, who worked in a material to all intents and purposes the same, or listen for a moment to the barbarous jangle which Lydgate and Occleve contrive to draw from the instrument their master had tuned so deftly. Gower has positively raised tediousness to the precision of science, he has made dulness an heirloom for the students of our literary history. As you slip to and fro on the frozen levels of his verse, which give no foothold to the mind, as your nervous ear awaits the inevitable recurrence of his rhyme, regularly pertinacious as the tick of an eight-day clock and reminding you of Wordsworth's

“ Once more the ass did lengthen out
The hard, dry, seesaw of his horrible bray,”

you learn to dread, almost to respect, the powers of this indefatigable man. He is the undertaker of the fair mediæval legend, and his style has the hateful gloss, the seemingly unnatural length, of a coffin. Love, beauty, passion, nature, art,

* I think he tried one now and then, like “*eyen columbine*.”

life, the natural and theological virtues, — there is nothing beyond his power to disenchant, nothing out of which the tremendous hydraulic press of his allegory (or whatever it is, for I am not sure if it be not something even worse) will not squeeze all feeling and freshness and leave it a juiceless pulp. It matters not where you try him, whether his story be Christian or pagan, borrowed from history or fable, you cannot escape him. Dip in at the middle or the end, dodge back to the beginning, the patient old man is there to take you by the button and go on with his imperturbable narrative. You may have left off with Clytemnestra, and you begin again with Samson; it makes no odds, for you cannot tell one from tother. His tediousness is omnipresent, and like Dogberry he could find in his heart to bestow it all (and more if he had it) on your worship. The word *lengthy* has been charged to our American account, but it must have been invented by the first reader of Gower's works, the only inspiration of which they were ever capable. Our literature had to lie by and recruit for more than four centuries ere it could give us an equal vacuity in Tupper, so persistent a uniformity of commonplace in the Recreations of a Country Parson. Let us be thankful that the industrious Gower never found time for recreation!

But a fairer as well as more instructive comparison lies between Chaucer and the author of *Piers Ploughman*. Langland has as much tenderness, as much interest in the varied picture of life, as hearty a contempt for hypocrisy, and almost an equal sense of fun. He has the same easy abundance of matter. But what a difference! It is the difference between the poet and the man of poetic temperament. The abundance of the one is a continual fulness within the fixed limits of good taste; that of the other is squandered in overflow. The one can be profuse on occasion; the other is diffuse whether he will or no. The one is full of talk; the other is garrulous. What in one is the refined *bonhomie* of a man of the world, is a rustic shrewdness in the other. Both are kindly in their satire, and have not (like too many reformers) that vindictive love of virtue which spreads the stool of repentance with thistle-burrs before they invite the erring to seat themselves therein. But what in *Piers Ploughman* is sly fun, has the breadth and depth of humor in Chaucer;

and it is plain that while the former was taken up by his moral purpose, the main interest of the latter turned to perfecting the form of his work. In short, Chaucer had that fine literary sense which is as rare as genius, and, united with it, as it was in him, assures an immortality of fame. It is not merely what he has to say, but even more the agreeable way he has of saying it, that captivates our attention and gives him an assured place in literature. Above all, it is not in detached passages that his charm lies, but in the entirety of expression and the cumulative effect of many particulars working toward a common end. Now though *ex ungue leonem* be a good rule in comparative anatomy, its application, except in a very limited way, in criticism is sure to mislead; for we should always bear in mind that the really great writer is great in the mass, and is to be tested less by his cleverness in the elaboration of parts than by that *reach* of mind which is incapable of random effort, which selects, arranges, combines, rejects, denies itself the cheap triumph of immediate effects, because it is absorbed by the controlling charm of proportion and unity. A careless good-luck of phrase is delightful; but criticism cleaves to the teleological argument, and distinguishes the creative intellect, not so much by any happiness of natural endowment as by the marks of design. It is true that one may sometimes discover by a single verse whether an author have imagination, or may make a shrewd guess whether he have style or no, just as by a few spoken words you may judge of a man's accent; but the true artist in language is never spotty, and needs no guide-boards of admiring italics, a critical method introduced by Leigh Hunt, whose feminine temperament gave him acute perceptions at the expense of judgment. This is the Bœotian method, which offers us a brick as a sample of the house, forgetting that it is not the goodness of the separate bricks, but the way in which they are put together, that brings them within the province of art, and makes the difference between a heap and a house. A great writer does not reveal himself here and there, but everywhere. Langland's verse runs mostly like a brook, with a beguiling and wellnigh slumberous prattle, but he, more often than any writer of his class, flashes into salient lines, gets inside our guard with the home-thrust of a

forthright word, and he gains it taken piecemeal. His imagery is naturally and vividly picturesque, as where he says of Old Age,—

“Eld the hoar
That was in the vauntward,
And bare the banner before death,”—

and he softens to a sweetness of sympathy beyond Chaucer when he speaks of the poor or tells us that Mercy is “sib of all sinful”; but to compare *Piers Ploughman* with the *Canterbury Tales* is to compare sermon with song.

Let us put a bit of Langland’s satire beside one of Chaucer’s. Some people in search of Truth meet a pilgrim and ask him whence he comes. He gives a long list of holy places, appealing for proof to the relics on his hat:—

“‘I have walked full wide in wet and in dry
And sought saints for my soul’s health.’
‘Know’st thou ever a relic that is called Truth?
Couldst thou show us the way where that wight dwelleth?’
‘Nay, so God help me,’ said the man then,
‘I saw never palmer with staff nor with scrip
Ask after him ever till now in this place.’”

This is a good hit, and the poet is satisfied; but, in what I am going to quote from Chaucer, everything becomes picture, over which lies broad and warm the sunshine of humorous fancy.

“In oldē dayēs of the King Artour
Of which that Britouns speken gret honour,
All was this lond fulfilled of fayerie:
The elf-queen with her joly compaignie
Dancēd ful oft in many a grenē mede:
This was the old opinion as I rede;
I speke of many hundrid yer ago:
But now can no man see none elvēs mo,
For now the gretē charite and prayēres
Of lymytours and other holy freres
That sechen every lond and every streem,
As thick as motis in the sonnēbeam,
Blessyng halles, chambres, kichenēs, and boures,
Citees and burghēs, castels hihe and toures,
Thorpēs and bernēs, shepnes and dayeries,
This makith that ther ben no fayeries.
For ther as wont to walken was an elf
There walkith none but the lymytour himself,
In undermelēs and in morwenynges,

And sayth his matyns and his holy thinges,
As he goth in his lymytatioun.
Wommen may now go sauflly up and down ;
In every bush or under every tre
There is none other incubus but he,
And he ne wol doon hem no dishonour."

How cunningly the contrast is suggested here between the Elf-queen's jolly company and the unsocial limiters, thick as motes in the sunbeam, yet each walking by himself! Even Shakespeare, who seems to come in after everybody has done his best with a "Let me take hold a minute and show you how to do it," could not have bettered this.

Piers Ploughman is the best example I know of what is called popular poetry, — of compositions, that is, which contain all the simpler elements of poetry, but still in solution, not crystallized around any thread of artistic purpose. In it appears at her best the Anglo-Saxon Muse, a first cousin of Poor Richard, full of proverbial wisdom, who always brings her knitting in her pocket, and seems most at home in the chimney-corner. It is genial; it plants itself firmly on human nature with its rights and wrongs; it has a surly honesty, prefers the downright to the gracious, and conceives of speech as a tool rather than a musical instrument. If we should seek for a single word that would define it most precisely, we should not choose simplicity, but homeliness. There is more or less of this in all early poetry, to be sure; but I think it especially proper to English poets, and to the most English among them, like Cowper, Crabbe, and one is tempted to add Wordsworth, — where he forgets Coleridge's private lectures. In reading such poets as Langland, also, we are not to forget a certain charm of distance in the very language they use, making it unhackneyed without being alien. As it is the chief function of the poet to make the familiar novel, these fortunate early risers of literature, who gather phrases with the dew still on them, have their poetry done for them, as it were, by their vocabulary. But in Chaucer, as in all great poets, the language gets its charm from him. The force and sweetness of his genius kneaded more kindly together the Latin and Teutonic elements of our mother-tongue, and made something better than

either. The necessity of writing poetry, and not mere verse, made him a reformer whether he would or no; and the instinct of his finer ear was a guide such as none before him or contemporary with him, nor indeed any that came after him, till Spenser, could command. Gower had no notion of the uses of rhyme except as a kind of crease at the end of every eighth syllable, where the verse was to be folded over again into another layer. He says, for example,

“ This maiden Canacee was hight,
Both in the day and eke by night,”

as if people commonly changed their names at dark. And he could not even contrive to say this without the clumsy pleonasm of *both* and *eke*. Chaucer was put to no such shifts of piecing out his metre with loose-woven bits of baser stuff. He himself says, in the *Man of Law's Tale*,—

“ Me lists not of the chaff nor of the straw
To make so long a tale as of the corn.”

One of the world's three or four great story-tellers, he was also one of the best versifiers that ever made English trip and sing with a gayety that seems careless, but where every foot beats time to the tune of the thought. By the skilful arrangement of his pauses he evaded the monotony of the couplet, and gave to the rhymed pentameter, which he made our heroic measure, something of the architectural repose of blank verse. He found our language lumpish, stiff, unwilling, too apt to speak Saxonly in grouty monosyllables; he left it enriched with the longer measure of the Italian and Provençal poets. He reconciled, in the harmony of his verse, the English bluntness with the dignity and elegance of the less homely Southern speech. Though he did not and could not create our language (for he who writes to be read does not write for linguists), yet it is true that he first made it easy, and to that extent modern, so that Spenser, two hundred years later, studied his method and called him master. He first wrote *English*; and it was a feeling of this, I suspect, that made it fashionable in Elizabeth's day to “talk pure Chaucer.” Already we find in his works verses that might pass without question in Milton or even Wordsworth, so mainly unchanged have the language of poetry and the movement of verse remained from his day to our own.

“Thou Polymnia
 On Pérnaso, that, with * thy sisters glad,
 By Helicon, not far from Cirrea,
 Singest with voice memorial in the shade,
 Under the laurel which that may not fade.”

“And downward from a hill under a bent
 There stood the temple of Mars omnipotent
 Wrought all of burnèd steel, of which th’ entrée
 Was long and strait and ghastly for to see :
 The northern light in at the doorès shone
 For window in the wall ne was there none
 Through which men mighten any light discerne ;
 The dore was all of adamant eterne.”

And here are some lines that would not seem out of place in the *Paradise of Dainty Devises* : —

“Hide, Absolom, thy giltè [gilded] tresses clear,
 Esther lay thou thy meekness all adown.

Make of your wifehood no comparison ;
 Hide ye your beauties Ysoude and Elaine,
 My lady cometh, that all this may distain.”

When I remember Chaucer’s malediction upon his scrivener, and consider that by far the larger proportion of his verses (allowing always for change of pronunciation) are perfectly accordant with our present accentual system, I cannot believe that he ever wrote an imperfect line. His ear would never have tolerated the verses of nine syllables, with a strong accent on the first, attributed to him by Mr. Skeate and Mr. Morris. Such verses seem to me simply impossible in the pentameter iambic as Chaucer wrote it. A great deal of misapprehension would be avoided in discussing English metres, if it were only understood that quantity in Latin and quantity in English mean very different things. Perhaps the best quantitative verses in our language (even better than Coleridge’s) are to be found in *Mother Goose*, composed by nurses wholly by ear and beating time as they danced the baby on their knee. I suspect Chaucer and Shakespeare would be surprised into a smile by the learned arguments which supply their halting verses with every kind of excuse except that of

* Commonly printed *hath*.

being readable. When verses were written to be chanted, more license could be granted, for the ear tolerates the widest deviations from habitual accent in words that are sung. *Segnius irritant demissa per aurem*. To some extent the same thing is true of anapæstic and other tripping measures, but we cannot admit it in marching tunes like those of Chaucer. He wrote for the eye more than for the voice, as poets had begun to do long before.* Some loose talk of Coleridge, loose in spite of its affectation of scientific precision, about "retardations" and the like, has misled many honest persons into believing that they can make good verse out of bad prose. Coleridge himself, from natural fineness of ear, was the best metrist among modern English poets, and, read with proper allowances, his remarks upon versification are always instructive to whoever is not rhythm-deaf. But one has no patience with the dyspondæuses, the pæon primuses, and what not, with which he darkens verses that are to be explained only by the contemporary habits of pronunciation. Till after the time of Shakespeare we must always bear in mind that it is not a language of books but of living speech that we have to deal with. Of this language Coleridge had little knowledge, except what could be acquired through the ends of his fingers as they lazily turned the leaves of his haphazard reading. If his eye was caught by a single passage that gave him a chance to theorize he did not look farther. Speaking of Massinger, for example, he says, "When a speech is interrupted, or one of the characters speaks aside, the last

* Froissart's description of the book of *traités amoureux et de moralité*, which he had had engrossed for presentation to Richard II. in 1394, is enough to bring tears to the eyes of a modern author. "Et lui plut très grandement; et plaire bien lui devoit car il était enluminé, écrit et historié et couvert de vermeil velours à dis cloux d'argent dorés d'or, et roses d'or au milieu, et à deux grands fremaulx dorés et richement ouvrés au milieu de rosiers d'or." How lovingly he lingers over it, hooking it together with *et* after *et*! But two centuries earlier, while the *jongleurs* were still in full song, poems were also read aloud.

"Pur remembrer des ancessours
Les faits et les dits et les mours,
Deit l'en les livres et les gestes
Et les estoires lire a festes."

Roman du Rou.

But Chaucer wrote for the private reading of the closet.

syllable of the former speech and first of the succeeding Massinger counts for one, because both are supposed to be spoken at the same moment.

‘And felt the sweetness of’t
‘How her mouth runs over.’”

Now fifty instances may be cited from Massinger which tell against this fanciful notion, for one that seems, and only seems, in its favor. Any one tolerably familiar with the dramatists knows that in the passage quoted by Coleridge, the *how* being emphatic, “*how her*” was pronounced *how’r*. He tells us that “Massinger is fond of the anapæst in the first and third foot, as : —

‘Tō yōŭr mōre | thān mās|cūlinē rēa|sōn thāt | cōmmānds ’ēm ||.’

Likewise of the second pæon (_ - _ _) in the first foot, followed by four trochees (_ _), as : —

‘Sō grēedilȳ | lōng fōr, | knōw theīr | titill|atiōns.’”

In truth, he was no fonder of them than his brother dramatists who, like him, wrote for the voice by the ear. “To your” is still one syllable in ordinary speech, and “masculine” and “greedily” were and are dissyllables or trisyllables according to their place in the verse. Coleridge was making pedantry of a very simple matter. Yet he has said with perfect truth of Chaucer’s verse, “Let a few plain rules be given for sounding the final *è* of syllables, and for expressing the terminations of such words as *ocēan* and *natiōn*, &c., as dissyllables, — or let the syllables to be sounded in such cases be marked by a competent metrist. This simple expedient would, with a very few trifling exceptions, where the errors are inveterate, enable any one to feel the perfect smoothness and harmony of Chaucer’s verse.” But let us keep widely clear of Latin and Greek terms of prosody! It is also more important here than even with the dramatists of Shakespeare’s time to remember that we have to do with a language caught more from the ear than from books. The best school for learning to understand Chaucer’s elisions, compressions, slurrings-over and running-together of syllables is to listen to the habitual speech of rustics with whom language is still plastic to meaning, and hurries or prolongs itself accordingly. Here is a con-

traction frequent in Chaucer, and still common in New England :

“But me were lever than [lever 'n] all this town, quod he.”

Let one example suffice for many. To Coleridge's rules another should be added by a wise editor ; and that is to restore the final *n* in the infinitive and third person plural of verbs, and in such other cases as can be justified by the authority of Chaucer himself. Surely his ear could never have endured the sing-song of such verses as

“I couthe telle for a gowne-cloth,”

or

“Than ye to me schuld breke youre trouthe.”

Chaucer's measure is so uniform (making due allowances) that words should be transposed or even omitted where the verse manifestly demands it, — and with copyists so long and dull of ear this is often the case. Sometimes they leave out a needful word : —

“But er [the] thunder stynte, there cometh rain,”

“When [that] we ben yflattered and ypraised,”

“Tak [ye] him for the greatest gentleman.”

Sometimes they thrust in a word or words that hobble the verse : —

“She trowed he were yfel in [some] maladie,”

“Ye faren like a man [that] had lost his wit,”

“Then have I got of you the maystrie, quod she,”

(Then have I got the maystery, quod she,)

“And quod the jugē [also] thou must lose thy head.”

Sometimes they give a wrong word identical in meaning : —

“And therwithal he knew [couthē] no proverbes.”

Sometimes they change the true order of the words : —

“Therefore no woman of clerkēs is [is of clerkēs] praised”

“His felaw lo, here he stont [stont he] hool on live.”

“He that covēteth is a porē wight

For he wold have that is not in his might ;

But he that nought hath ne coveteth nought to have.”

Here the “but” of the third verse belongs at the head of the first, and we get rid of the anomaly of “covēteth” differently accented within two lines. Nearly all the seemingly unmetrical verses may be righted in this way. One often finds such changes made by ear justified by the readings in other texts,

and we cannot but hope that the Chaucer Society will give us the means of at last settling upon a version which shall make the poems of one of the most fluent of metrists at least readable. Let any one compare the Franklin's Tale in the Aldine edition with the text given by Wright, and he will find both sense and metre clear themselves up in a surprising way. A careful collation of texts, by the way, confirms one's confidence in Tyrwhytt's good taste and thoroughness.

I will give one more example of his verse, again making my selection from one of his less mature works. He is speaking of Tarquin:—

“And ay the morë he was in despair
 The more he coveted and thought her fair;
 His blindë lust was all his coveting.
 On morrow when the bird began to sing
 Unto the siege he cometh full privily
 And by himself he walketh soberly
 The image of her recording alway new:
 Thus lay her hair, and thus fresh was her hue,
 Thus sate, thus spake, thus span, this was her cheer,
 Thus fair she was, and this was her manére.
 All this conceit his heart hath new ytake,
 And as the sea, with tempest all toshake,
 That after, when the storm is all ago,
 Yet will the water quap a day or two,
 Right so, though that her formë were absënt,
 The plesance of her formë was präsent.”

And this passage leads me to say a few words of Chaucer as a descriptive poet; for I think it a great mistake to attribute to him any properly dramatic power, as some have done. Even Herr Hertzberg, in his remarkably intelligent essay, is led a little astray on this point by his enthusiasm. Chaucer is a great narrative poet; and, in this species of poetry, though the author's personality should never be obtruded, it yet unconsciously pervades the whole, and communicates an individual quality,—a kind of flavor of its own. This very quality, and it is one of the highest in its way and place, would be fatal to all dramatic force. The narrative poet is occupied with his characters as picture, with their grouping, even their costume, it may be, and he feels for and with them instead of being they for the moment, as the

dramatist must always be. The story-teller must possess the situation perfectly in all its details, while the imagination of the dramatist must be possessed and mastered by it. The latter puts before us the very passion or emotion itself in its utmost intensity; the former gives them, not in their primary form, but in that derivative one which they have acquired by passing through his own mind and being modified by his reflection. The deepest pathos of the drama, like the "prithée, undo this button" with which Shakespeare tells us that Lear's heart is bursting, is sudden as a stab, while in narrative it is more or less suffused with pity,—a feeling capable of prolonged sustention. This presence of the author's own sympathy is noticeable in all Chaucer's pathetic passages, as, for instance, in the lamentation of Constance over her child in the *Man of Law's Tale*. When he comes to the sorrow of his story, he seems to croon over his thoughts, to soothe them and dwell upon them with a kind of pleased compassion, as a child treats a wounded bird which he fears to grasp too tightly, and yet cannot make up his heart wholly to let go. It is true also of his humor that it pervades his comic tales like sunshine, and never dazzles the attention by a sudden flash. Sometimes he brings it in parenthetically, and insinuates a sarcasm so slyly as almost to slip by without our notice, as where he satirizes provincialism by the cock

"Who knew by nature each ascension
Of the equinoctial in his native town."

Sometimes he turns round upon himself and smiles at a trip he has made into fine writing:—

"Till that the brightë sun had lost his hue,
For th' orisont had reft the sun his light,
(This is as much to sayen as 'it was night.')

Nay, sometimes it twinkles roguishly through his very tears, as in the

" 'Why wouldest thou be dead,' these women cry,
'That haddest gold enough — and Emily?'"

that follows so close upon the profoundly tender despair of Arcite's farewell:—

"What is this world? What asken men to have?
Now with his love now in the coldë grave
Alone withouten any company!"

The power of diffusion without being diffuse would seem to be the highest merit of narration, giving it that easy flow which is so delightful. Chaucer's descriptive style is remarkable for its lowness of tone, — for that combination of energy with simplicity which is among the rarest gifts in literature. Perhaps all is said in saying that he has style at all, for that consists mainly in the absence of undue emphasis and exaggeration, in the clear uniform pitch which penetrates our interest and retains it, where mere loudness would only disturb and irritate.

Not that Chaucer cannot be intense, too, on occasion ; but it is with a quiet intensity of his own, that comes in as it were by accident.

“ Upon a thickë palfrey, paper-white,
With saddle red embroidered with delight,
Sits Dido :
And she is fair as is the brightë morrow
That healeth sickë folk of nightës sorrow.
Upon a courser startling as the fire,
Æneas sits.”

Pandarus, looking at Troilus,

“ Took up a light and found his countenance
As for to look upon an old romance.”

With Chaucer it is always the thing itself and not the description of it that is the main object. His picturesque bits are incidental to the story, glimpsed in passing ; they never stop the way. His key is so low that his high lights are never obtrusive. His imitators, like Leigh Hunt, and Keats in his *Endymion*, missing the nice gradation with which the master toned everything down, become streaky. Hogarth, who reminds one of him in the variety and natural action of his figures, is like him also in the subdued brilliancy of his coloring. When Chaucer condenses, it is because his conception is vivid. He does not need to personify Revenge, for personification is but the subterfuge of unimaginative and professional poets ; but he embodies the very passion itself in a verse that makes us glance over our shoulder as if we heard a stealthy tread behind us : —

“ The smiler with the knife hid under the cloak.” *

* Compare this with the Mumbo-Jumbo Revenge in Collins's Ode.

And yet how unlike is the operation of the imaginative faculty in him and Shakespeare! When the latter describes, his epithets imply always an impression on the moral sense (so to speak) of the person who hears or sees. The sun "flatters the mountain-tops with sovereign eye"; the bending "weeds lacquey the dull stream"; the shadow of the falcon "coucheth the fowl below"; the smoke is "helpless"; when Tarquin enters the chamber of Lucrece "the threshold grates the door to have him heard." His outward sense is merely a window through which the metaphysical eye looks forth, and his mind passes over at once from the simple sensation to the complex *meaning* of it,—feels *with* the object instead of merely feeling it. His imagination is forever dramatizing. Chaucer gives only the direct impression made on the eye or ear. He was the first great poet who really loved outward nature as the source of conscious pleasurable emotion. The Troubadour hailed the return of spring; but with him it was a piece of empty ritualism. Chaucer took a true delight in the new green of the leaves and the return of singing birds,—a delight as simple as that of Robin Hood:—

"In summer when the shaws be sheen
And leaves be large and long,
It is full merry in fair forest
To hear the small birds' song."

He has never so much as heard of the "burthen and the mystery of all this unintelligible world." His flowers and trees and birds have never bothered themselves with Spinoza. He himself sings more like a bird than any other poet, because it never occurred to him, as to Goethe, that he ought to do so. He pours himself out in sincere joy and thankfulness. When we compare Spenser's imitations of him with the original passages we feel that the delight of the later poet was more in the expression than the thing itself. Nature with him is only good to be transfigured by art. We walk among Chaucer's sights and sounds; we listen to Spenser's musical reproduction of them. In the same way, the pleasure which Chaucer takes in telling his stories has in itself the effect of consummate skill, and makes us follow all the windings of his fancy with sympathetic interest. His best tales run on like one of our inland rivers, some-

times hastening a little and turning upon themselves in eddies that dimple without retarding the current; sometimes loitering smoothly, while here and there a quiet thought, a tender feeling, a pleasant image, a golden-hearted verse, opens quietly as a water-lily, to float on the surface without breaking it into ripple. The vulgar intellectual palate hankers after the titillation of foaming phrase, and thinks nothing good for much that does not go off with a pop like a champagne cork. The mellow suavity of more precious vintages seems insipid; but the taste, in proportion as it refines, learns to appreciate the indefinable flavor, too subtle for analysis. A manner has prevailed of late in which every other word seems to be underscored as in a school-girl's letter. The poet seems intent on showing his sinew, as if the power of the slim Apollo lay in the girth of his biceps. Force for the mere sake of force ends like Milo, caught and held mockingly fast by the recoil of the log he undertook to rive. In the race of fame, there are a score capable of brilliant *spurts* for one who comes in winner after a steady pull with wind and muscle to spare. Chaucer never shows any signs of effort, and it is a main proof of his excellence that he can be so inadequately sampled by detached passages, — by single lines taken away from the connection in which they contribute to the general effect. He has that continuity of thought, that evenly prolonged power, and that delightful equanimity, which characterize the higher orders of mind. There is something in him of the disinterestedness that made the Greeks masters in art. His phrase is never importunate. His simplicity is that of elegance, not of poverty. The quiet unconcern with which he says his best things is peculiar to him among English poets, though Goldsmith, Addison, and Thackeray have approached it in prose. He prattles inadvertently away, and all the while, like the princess in the story, lets fall a pearl at every other word. It is such a piece of good luck to be natural! It is the good gift which the fairy godmother brings to her prime favorites in the cradle. If not genius, it is alone what makes genius amiable in the arts. If a man have it not, he will never find it, for when it is sought it is gone.

When Chaucer describes anything it is commonly by one of

those simple and obvious epithets or qualities that are so easy to miss. Is it a woman? He tells us she is *fresh*; that she has *glad* eyes; that "every day her beauty newed"; that

"Methought all fellowship as naked
Withouten her that I saw once,
As a coróne without the stones."

Sometimes he describes amply by the merest hint, as where the Friar, before setting himself softly down, drives away the cat. We know without need of more words that he has chosen the snuggest corner. In some of his early poems he sometimes, it is true, falls into the catalogue style of his contemporaries; but after he had found his genius he never particularizes too much,—a process as deadly to all effect as an explanation to a pun. The first stanza of the Clerk's Tale gives us a landscape whose stately choice of objects shows a skill in composition worthy of Claude, the last artist who painted nature epically:—

"There is at the west endë of Itaile,
Down at the foot of Vesulus the cold,
A lusty plain abundant of vitaille,
Where many a tower and town thou may'st behold
That founded were in time of fathers old,
And many another delitable sight;
And Sálucës this noble country hight."

The Pre-Raphaelite style of landscape entangles the eye among the obtrusive weeds and grass-blades of the foreground which, in looking at a real bit of scenery, we overlook; but what a sweep of vision is here! and what happy generalization in the sixth verse as the poet turns away to the business of his story! The whole is full of open air.

But it is in his characters, especially, that his manner is large and free; for he is painting history, though with the fidelity of portrait. He brings out strongly the essential traits, characteristic of the genus rather than of the individual. The merchant who keeps so steady a countenance that

"There wist no wight that he was e'er in debt,"

the Sergeant at Law, "who seemëd busier than he was," the Doctor of Medicine, whose "study was but little on the Bible,"—in all these cases it is the type and not the person-

age that fixes his attention. William Blake says truly, though he expresses his meaning somewhat clumsily, "the characters of Chaucer's Pilgrims are the characters which compose all ages and nations. Some of the names and titles are altered by time, but the characters remain forever unaltered, and consequently they are the physiognomies and lineaments of universal human life, beyond which Nature never steps. Names alter, things never alter. As Newton numbered the stars, and as Linnæus numbered the plants, so Chaucer numbered the classes of men." In his outside accessories, it is true, he sometimes seems as minute as if he were illuminating a misal. Nothing escapes his sure eye for the picturesque, — the cut of the beard, the soil of armor on the buff jerkin, the rust on the sword, the expression of the eye. But in this he has an artistic purpose. It is here that he individualizes, and, while every touch harmonizes with and seems to complete the moral features of the character, makes us feel that we are among living men, and not the abstracted images of men. Crabbe adds particular to particular, scattering rather than deepening the impression of reality, and making us feel as if every man were a species by himself; but Chaucer, never forgetting the essential sameness of human nature, makes it possible, and even probable, that his motley characters should meet on a common footing, while he gives to each the *expression* that belongs to him, the result of special circumstance or training. Indeed, the absence of any suggestion of *caste* cannot fail to strike any reader familiar with the literature on which he is supposed to have formed himself. No characters are at once so broadly human and so definitely outlined as his. Belonging, some of them, to extinct types, they continue contemporary and familiar forever. So wide is the difference between knowing a great many men and that knowledge of human nature which comes of sympathetic insight and not of observation alone.

It is this power of sympathy which makes Chaucer's satire so kindly, — more so, one is tempted to say, than the panegyric of Pope. Intellectual satire gets its force from personal or moral antipathy, and measures offences by some rigid conventional standard. Its mouth waters over a galling word, and it loves to say *Thou*, pointing out its victim to public scorn.

Indignatio facit versus, it boasts, though they might as often be fathered on envy or hatred. But imaginative satire, warmed through and through with the genial leaven of humor, smiles half sadly and murmurs *We*. Chaucer either makes one knave betray another, through a natural jealousy of competition, or else expose himself with a *naïveté* of good-humored cynicism which amuses rather than disgusts. In the former case the butt has a kind of claim on our sympathy; in the latter, it seems nothing strange if the sunny atmosphere which floods that road to Canterbury should tempt any one to throw off one disguise after another without suspicion. With perfect tact, too, the Host is made the *choragus* in this diverse company, and the coarse jollity of his temperament explains, if it does not excuse, much that would otherwise seem out of keeping. Surely nobody need have any scruples with *him*.

Chaucer seems to me to have been one of the most purely original of poets, as much so in respect of the world that is about us as Dante in respect of that which is within us. There had been nothing like him before, there has been nothing since. He is original, not in the sense that he thinks and says what nobody ever thought and said before, and what nobody can ever think and say again, but because he is always natural, because, if not always absolutely new, he is always delightfully fresh, because he sets before us the world as it honestly appeared to Geoffrey Chaucer, and not a world as it seemed proper to certain people that it ought to appear. He found that the poetry which had preceded him had been first the expression of individual feeling, then of class feeling as the vehicle of legend and history, and at last had wellnigh lost itself in chasing the mirage of allegory. Literature seemed to have passed through the natural stages which at regular intervals bring it to decline. Even the lyrics of the *jongleurs* were all run in one mould, and the Pastourelles of Northern France had become as artificial as the Pastorals of Pope. The Romances of chivalry had been made over into prose, and the *Melusine* of his contemporary Jehan d'Arras is the forlorn hope of the modern novel. Arrived thus far in their decrepitude, the monks endeavored to give them a religious and moral turn by allegorizing them. Their process reminds one of something Ulloa tells us

of the fashion in which the Spaniards converted the Mexicans : " Here we found an old man in a cavern so extremely aged as it was wonderful, which could neither see nor go because he was so lame and crooked. The Father, Friar Raimund, said it were good (seeing he was so aged) to make him a Christian ; whereupon we baptized him." The monks found the Romances in the same stage of senility, and gave them a saving sprinkle with the holy water of allegory. Perhaps they were only trying to turn the enemy's own weapons against himself, for it was the free-thinking Romance of the Rose that more than anything else had made allegory fashionable. Plutarch tells us that an allegory is to say one thing where another is meant, and this might have been needful for the personal security of Jean de Meung, as afterwards for that of his successor, Rabelais. But, except as a means of evading the fagot, the method has few recommendations. It reverses the true office of poetry by making the real unreal. It is imagination endeavoring to recommend itself to the understanding by means of cuts. If an author be in such deadly earnest, or if his imagination be of such creative vigor as to project real figures when it meant to cast only a shadow upon vapor ; if the true spirit come, at once obsequious and terrible, when the conjurer has drawn his circle and gone through with his incantations merely to produce a proper frame of mind in his audience, as was the case with Dante, there is no longer any question of allegory as the word and thing are commonly understood. But with all secondary poets, as with Spenser for example, the allegory does not become of one substance with the poetry, but is a kind of carven frame for it, whose figures lose their meaning, as they cease to be contemporary. It was not a style that could have much attraction for a nature so sensitive to the actual, so observant of it, so interested by it as that of Chaucer. He seems to have tried his hand at all the forms in vogue, and to have arrived in his old age at the truth, essential to all really great poetry, that his own instincts were his safest guides, that there is nothing deeper in life than life itself, and that to conjure an allegorical significance into it was to lose sight of its real meaning. He of all men could not say one thing and mean another, unless by way of humorous contrast.

In thus turning frankly and gayly to the actual world, and drinking inspiration from sources open to all ; in turning away from a colorless abstraction to the solid earth and to emotions common to every pulse ; in discovering that to make the best of nature, and not to grope vaguely after something better than nature, was the true office of Art ; in insisting on a definite purpose, on veracity, cheerfulness, and simplicity, Chaucer shows himself the true father and founder of what is characteristically *English* literature. He has a hatred of cant as hearty as Dr. Johnson's, though he has a slier way of showing it ; he has the placid commonsense of Franklin, the sweet, grave humor of Addison, the exquisite taste of Gray ; but the whole texture of his mind, though its substance seem plain and grave, shows itself at every turn iridescent with poetic feeling like shot silk. Above all, he has an eye for character that seems to have caught at once not only its mental and physical features, but even its expression in variety of costume, — an eye, indeed, second only, if it should be called second in some respects, to that of Shakespeare.

I know of nothing that may be compared with the prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*, and with that to the story of the Chanon's Yeoman before Chaucer. Characters and portraits from real life had never been drawn with such discrimination, or with such variety, never with such bold precision of outline, and with such a lively sense of the picturesque. His Parson is still unmatched, though Dryden and Goldsmith have both tried their hands in emulation of him. And the humor also in its suavity, its perpetual presence and its shy unobtrusiveness, is something wholly new in literature. For anything that deserves to be called like it in English we must wait for Henry Fielding.

Chaucer is the first great poet who has treated To-day as if it were as good as Yesterday, the first who held up a mirror to contemporary life in its infinite variety of high and low, of humor and pathos. But he reflected life in its large sense as the life of *men*, from the knight to the ploughman, — the life of every day as it is made up of that curious compound of human nature with manners. The very form of the *Canterbury Tales* was imaginative. The garden of Boccaccio, the supper-party of

Grazzini, and the voyage of Giraldis make a good enough thread for their stories, but exclude all but equals and friends, exclude consequently human nature in its wider meaning. But by choosing a pilgrimage, Chaucer puts us on a plane where all men are equal, with souls to be saved, and with another world in view that abolishes all distinctions. By this choice, and by making the Host of the Tabard always the central figure, he has happily united the two most familiar emblems of life,—the short journey and the inn. We find more and more as we study him that he rises quietly from the conventional to the universal, and may fairly take his place with Homer in virtue of the breadth of his humanity.

In spite of some external stains, which those who have studied the influence of manners will easily account for without imputing them to any moral depravity, we feel that we can join the pure-minded Spenser in calling him “most sacred, happy spirit.” If character may be divined from works, he was a good man, genial, sincere, hearty, temperate of mind, more wise, perhaps, for this world than the next, but thoroughly humane, and friendly with God and men. I know not how to sum up what we feel about him better than by saying (what would have pleased most one who was indifferent to fame) that we love him more even than we admire. We are sure that here was a true brother-man so kindly that, in his House of Fame, after naming the great poets, he throws in a pleasant word for the oaten-pipes

“Of the little herd-grooms
That keepen beasts among the brooms.”

No better inscription can be written on the first page of his works than that which he places over the gate in his Assembly of Fowls, and which contrasts so sweetly with the stern lines of Dante from which they were imitated:—

“Through me men go into the blissful place
Of the heart’s heal and deadly woundës’ cure;
Through me men go unto the will of Grace,
Where green and lusty May doth ever endure;
This is the way to all good aventure;
Be glad, thou Reader, and thy sorrow offcast,
All open am I, pass in, and speed thee fast!”

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL.